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ABSTRACT

This digest is drawn from "Transfer Students: Trends and Issues," the summer 2001 issue of New Directions for Community Colleges. Although community colleges in the United States have complex academic and vocational goals, the transfer function is of central importance to maintaining access to higher education. Community colleges provide the lower-division coursework for those who may be ineligible for admission to a four-year university or college as well as for those who are eligible but choose community colleges for their low cost and small class size. Research shows that the adjustment process of transfer students is likely to be complex due to the environmental differences between two- and four-year institutions. Transfer students have lower GPAs, higher attrition rates, and are more likely to end up on academic probation than native students. Racial and ethnic minorities may have an even harder time. This paper identifies four ways to improve the transfer process for minority students: (1) establishment of clear communication of transfer policies; (2) development of support programs at senior institutions; (3) assessment of institutional performance; and (4) inclusion of culturally competent staff members that communicate well in cross-cultural situations. The paper concludes that by understanding the issues associated with transfer, community colleges and universities can develop support programs that will facilitate successful transfer and persistence to the baccalaureate degree. (NB)

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Trends and Issues in Transfer

By Karen A. Kim

Although community colleges in the United States have complex academic and vocational goals, the transfer function is of central importance to maintaining access to higher education. Community colleges provide the lower-division coursework for the baccalaureate degree for those students who, immediately after high school, may be ineligible for admission to a four-year college or university. In addition, more and more students who are eligible to attend four-year institutions are choosing to attend community colleges with proven transfer rates because of their low cost, small class sizes, and student-centered faculty. To better understand the transfer process, research that examines student and academic issues and institutional factors at both community colleges and senior institutions proves useful. This Digest highlights current issues concerning the transfer function presented in "Transfer Students: Trends and Issues" (New Directions for Community Colleges, Summer 2001) with a specific focus on trends, research, and institutional programs.

Approaches to Studying Transfer

Studies about transfer students are both qualitative and quantitative, although the majority of studies use quantitative methods. Research most often consists of institutional research, statewide reports, university-based research, and joint projects by community colleges and universities. The number of issues addressed in research on transfer students is extensive, ranging from descriptive questions to more in-depth analysis of issues such as student satisfaction, academic performance, and patterns in the transfer process (Kozeracki).

Transfer studies that are designed with the intent of improving student outcomes and the effectiveness of community colleges can serve as examples for others. The design considerations that can help a study's effectiveness include: (1) a focus on things that can be changed, (2) questions specific enough to allow action to take place, and (3) consultation with those being evaluated (Kozeracki). Building a link between research and practice requires collaboration and may help to improve academic outcomes of transfer students. A study conducted by Santa Monica College (SMC) in California investigated the success of its students who transferred to six local four-year institutions in Los Angeles. Both questionnaires and focus groups were used to obtain information from the students about their experiences at SMC and at the four-year institution, and their adjustment process. The findings led SMC to create a series of recommendations designed to address student concerns about counseling services, financial aidinformation, writing preparation, and computer literacy (Johnson-Benson, Geltner, Steinberg).

Existing research on transfer can inform future studies, including research on transfer behavior (i.e., the movement of students through the educational pipeline), transfer adjustment (i.e., transfer student adjustment to the environment at the senior institution), and post-transfer behavior (i.e., behavior patterns of students after transferring to a senior institution).

Transfer Process Research Results

The 1997 National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) report on transfer behavior shows that of the 25 percent of community college students who reported they were working toward a B.A. degree during the academic year 1989-90, 39 percent transferred to a four-year institution by 1994. This same report also shows that of the students identified as prospective transfer students, 50 percent of full-timers transferred, compared with 26 percent of part-timers. In addition, while 65 percent transferred without an associate's degree, 43 percent of associate's degree completers received a bachelor's degree by 1994 compared to 17 percent without that credential (as cited in Laanan).

Research shows that the adjustment process of transfer students is likely to be complex—including academic, social, and psychological aspects—due to the environmental differences between two- and four-year institutions (Laanan). Comparisons between academic performance of transfer students and native students show that transfer students have lower GPAs, higher attrition rates and are more likely to end up on academic probation (Laanan). Institutional size and selectivity also have an impact on an individual's adjustment to college. Racial and ethnic minorities may experience additional stressors, derived from internal sources, demographics, and campus social climate (Laanan).

Post-transfer behavior trends show that students often experience *transfer shock*, a temporary dip in grades, in the first or second semester after transferring. A meta-analysis by Diaz of sixty-two studies shows 67 percent reporting that students recover from transfer shock, usually within the first year of transfer (as cited in Laanan).

An examination of issues that enhance (or deter) successful transfer of minority students identifies ways to improve the transfer process. The suggestions most often identified by the participating students include (1) establishment of clear communication

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of transfer policies, (2) development of support programs at senior institutions, (3) assessment of institutional performance, and (4) inclusion of culturally competent staff that communicates well in cross-cultural situations (Lee).

Institutional Programs

A look at institutional programs, both at community colleges and senior institutions, provides insight into ways that institutions are addressing issues concerning transfer adjustment, transfer behavior, and post-transfer behavior. Model support programs (i.e., existing programs that can serve as starting points for future expansion of research) may also assist in the development of effective programs (Eggleston and Laanan). Transfer centers, honors programs, and proactive institutional leadership are some of the structural supports that can help to promote transfer and persistence.

While some support programs are institutionally sponsored and developed for a specific campus, many include partnerships between two- and four-year institutions. Some collaborations also include support from other foundations or organizations, such as the Ford Foundation's grant to the National Center for Educational Alliances to develop transfer centers in urban community colleges (Zamani, p. 18). Several innovative transfer center programs have pursued avenues that will increase the number of students transferring to senior institutions, including the Summer Scholars Transfer Institute at University of California, Irvine and several southern California community colleges, the Illinois Board of Higher Education grant program, and the Glendale Community College program in California (Zamani). Community college and university partnerships have promoted smooth transitions through research, articulation agreements and campus programming (Zamani).

Many community colleges participate in partnership programs with four-year institutions to help promote transfer at their institutions. For example, the Transfer Alliance Program (TAP) promotes transfer between California community colleges and the University of California, Los Angeles. The TAP partnership between San Diego City College and UCLA encourages transfer through participation in an honors program. The *honors* approach has emerged as a strategy that enhances transferability and employability of students (Kane). Some of the main aspects of the San Diego City College Honors Program include a core curriculum that functions as interconnected courses with thematic linkages, rigorous courses that use interdisciplinary approaches and/or innovative teaching-learning modalities, development of faculty-student relationships, and incorporation of extracurricular experiences into the program (Kane).

Conclusion

Community college campuses can better respond to issues concerning transfer students if the administrative leadership, including the president, is informed of research, raises expectations for transfer, and proactively develops policies and programs that support transfer (Helm and Cohen). The approach should differ depending on the transfer rate. For example, a college with a high transfer rate may have an honors program that attracts the best students in local high schools while a college with a low transfer rate may focus on efforts to change public perception of the institution, including prospective high school students (Helm and Cohen).

While the transfer function is a central mission for community colleges, the issues surrounding transfer are complex. Recent statistical trends show that improvements are still needed in the number of community college students transferring and persisting to graduation at a four-year university as well as in their adjustment to the environment at these four-year institutions.

An understanding of issues concerning the community college transfer student population will contribute to development and evaluation of support programs that promote transfer and persistence (Eggleston and Laanan). In order for this research to be effective it should include characteristics of transfer students, needs of transfer students at senior institutions, and the level of support provided by senior institutions (Eggleston and Laanan). By understanding the student and academic issues and the institutional factors associated with transfer, community colleges and universities can develop support programs that will facilitate successful transfer and persistence to the baccalaureate degree and beyond.

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